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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHLI #2406/01 2981608
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 251608Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY LISBON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5294
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 0314
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 0059
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1456
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA 0029

C O N F I D E N T I A L LISBON 002406

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/16/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#) [BR](#) [PO](#)
SUBJECT: PORTUGAL: VENEZUELA SPECIAL COORDINATOR DISCUSSES
VENEZUELA, BRAZIL, AND CUBA

REF: LISBON 2160

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OFFICER ROBERT
HOWES FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D).

11. (C) Summary: In an October 3 meeting with WHA Special Coordinator for Venezuela Deborah McCarthy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Latin America Director Helena Coutinho stressed Portugal's commitment to a fair Venezuelan presidential campaign with a viable opposition to prevent Chavez from gathering too much power. The GOP also remains fully engaged in urging African counterparts to support Guatemala in the election for the UN Security Council (UNSC). Coutinho highlighted Portugal's long-standing relationship with Brazil and its ability to work well with the Lula administration. With regards to Cuba, Coutinho concurred with the U.S. desire to see the return of democratic rule but noted the EU approach was to keep open lines of communication with the Cuban government while simultaneously talking to independent civil society groups. End Summary.

Relations with Venezuela

12. (C) Coutinho stated that the fact that nearly half-million Portuguese nationals and additional 800,000 persons of Portuguese descent reside in Venezuela influences Portugal's relationship with the Chavez government. Since last year, Chavez has requested a state visit with the Portuguese president but the GOP has not been willing to find a convenient time. Coutinho expressed concern regarding Chavez's attempts to further consolidate power, especially judicial power, in his own hands. She cited the imprisonment of a Portuguese pilot as an example of this "blurring" of powers. Jailed for several months last year, the pilot's trial was postponed sixteen times and the Venezuelan government was never in a hurry to resolve the case, although he was eventually released. McCarthy concurred with the concern over power consolidation and reiterated the USG desire to work with other countries both inside and outside the region that may exert an influence on Chavez.

Venezuelan Presidential Elections

13. (C) Portugal remains committed to a fair Venezuelan presidential campaign and hopes to send observers as part of an EU mission. McCarthy also underscored the need for international election observers but noted that the USG could not fund or send any observers to Venezuela. Coutinho viewed the participation of the opposition in the elections as a positive sign as they will be the ones to prevent Chavez from drawing too much power into his own hands. Nonetheless, Coutinho noted that the recent placement of a campaign billboard showing Chavez meeting with Prime Minister Socrates could be a boost to his electoral campaign. While the GOP

was angered by the posters and strongly expressed its dissatisfaction to the Chavez government (reftel), it might be too late to change the minds and potential votes of the many Portuguese living in Venezuela who only saw the poster touting the meeting with Socrates.

UNSC Vote

14. (C) McCarthy finished the conversation on Venezuela by commenting that the outcome of the UNSC vote between Venezuela and Guatemala would not be decided in the western hemisphere but in other parts of the world, notably Africa. McCarthy reiterated the USG request that Portugal advocate for Guatemala, especially given Portugal's close relationship and influence with lusophone countries in Africa. Coutinho responded that Portugal had been previously demarched on the issue by the USG and that the GOP had discussed the issue with its African counterparts and would continue to do so.

Strong Ties to Brazil

15. (C) Coutinho noted that Portugal and Brazil share a very strong, close, and long-standing relationship. Portugal works well with the Lula Government, has an increasing number of investments in Brazil, and is actively trying to attract more Brazilian investment to Portugal. Coutinho opined that Lula has done a good job of managing Brazil's economy (despite recent corruption scandals) and that Portugal felt positively about the direction of Brazil under Lula. McCarthy commented on USG's continued engagement with Brazil, noting that it could play a greater leadership role in the hemisphere.

Cuba

16. (C) The future of Cuba continues to be a topic of great interest to both Portugal and the EU, and Coutinho agreed with McCarthy that Cuba must move forward democratically. The big question was how this transition could be done without the EU and others being seen as interfering in the country's internal affairs. For the time being, the EU plans to maintain the dialogue with the Cuban government while reaching out to the independent civil society. According to Coutinho, civil society groups in Cuba have acted very prudently and thus it was difficult to gauge when and how they will act. For now, the EU can only keep in contact with them and heed their request to keep such contacts low-key.

Comment

17. (C) Coutinho's comments during the meeting indicated that the GOP remains in broad agreement with the U.S. on issues of immediate concern, such as the need for a valid opposition on the upcoming Venezuelan elections and the importance of ensuring a transition to democratic rule in Cuba. However, her strongest points about the many Portuguese living in Venezuela, Portugal's close ties with Brazil, and EU's approach on Cuba demonstrate that Portugal is not only watching the region closely but is also closely looking after what it sees as its own and EU interests, which are not always consistent with ours.

18. (U) Special Coordinator for Venezuela Deborah McCarthy cleared this cable.
Hoffman